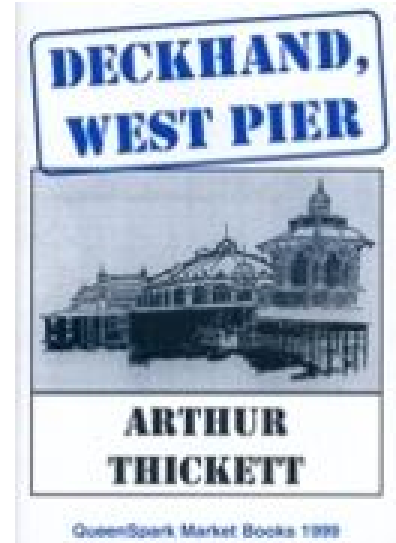


About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.



We thank you for choosing this book, and if you can make a donation to QueenSpark Books, please click on the “donate” button on the book page on our website. This book remains the copyright of QueenSpark Books, so if reproducing any part of it, please ensure you credit QueenSpark Books as publisher.

About this book

Arthur Thickett’s 1993 memoir is the story of a young man who came to Brighton in the summer of 1970, full of hope and optimism – his goal was to find adventure and ultimately love. On his first day he found digs in Ovingdean, on his second day, he walked into a job as a deckhand on the West Pier.

This is a first-hand account of working on the pier and drinking in long-gone Brighton pubs. Haunted by memories of the Second World War, Arthur Thickett tried to reconcile himself to his past and find friendship and laughter. He described a town that behind the bright and lively holiday facade was full of lonely people.

Copyright 1993 QueenSpark Books
www.queensparkbooks.org.uk

DECKHAND, WEST PIER

1998 Foreword

Our first edition of this book came out in '93. '99 now looms...All things being

relative six years is a long time if you are young — and we are always young at 'QueenSpark'.

Ninety-three...The Tories were there 'forever'; Clinton hadn't been invented and the U.S. and Britain had hardly finished scrubbing away those 'collateral damage' stains oozing from the Gulf War even though Lady Macbeth herself had been shoved, struggling into the wings: 'so much Blood!'

But for me the outstanding event that year was attending our April 'Festival of Writing'. This annual 'Feast of Words' and lots of other things is held each April by our national umbrella organisation, the impressive 'Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers', (affectionately known as 'The Fed') of which QueenSpark Books is a proud founder member. In '93, our April 'Festival of Writing' was held at the Sheffield Hallam University, barely emerged from its poly-chrysalis stage, its wings still wet.

The Festival was located at the Collegiate Crescent site, as I recall a somewhat eerie place at night and a suitable setting for a lively three days which at times were more akin to the aforementioned Gulf War than a Festival of Writing...as some Old Hands may recall with a grimace. But I exaggerate; all our Festivals are lovely though they do have character. And all are welcome, whether belonging to member-groups or not. Since '93 I have become increasingly involved with 'The Fed' and all its affairs and in '95 I was elected on the exec. This year I was elected 'Chair' so of course I think The Fed is lovely! But our defining spiritual slogan; 'The Fed is its Membership!' – encapsulates very simply what The Fed is. And as I say of our Festivals, 'all are welcome'. (I haven't missed one since April '90).

But I digress – THE BOOK! The '93 text will remain untouched and speak for itself. No need to enlarge on anything...well, just a word about 'my seedy (Earls Court) bedsit'. Bedsits: I've seen a few....this one was a scruffy top floor garret with a shaky iron balcony overlooking a crescent-shaped garden, for use by the crescent residents. But for access you needed a key, which increased your rent, so I never had one. For two years I gazed over the forbidden garden – saw the trees blossom, the leaves fall, the snow melt – but I never entered it. To this day I feel for 'bedsitters'.

The Old Vienna Cafe is now long gone; I don't know if the farm is still there. Our pics displayed here are very real, showing the small dining room, scene of our lively breakfast debates, just as it was. The farm is clearly seen and you can with a struggle make out one or two of the chalets. Above all there is the hint of Old World quaintness and charm...quite as it was. But I almost forgot, somebody asked about The Goat; somebody would: yes, well....I'm doing quite well, thank you.

The pier itself: since '93 the Brighton West Pier Trust have continued to stick to their task most commendably and in 1996 their efforts were crowned with a substantial Lottery grant. Work has been undertaken; startling, even disconcerting changes have occurred; working people have been stranded on it; starlings visiting it en masse have been exquisitely captured over it on camera: The West Pier, battered and lonely, poignant but indefatigable, seems to have taken on an almost organic life of its own: what will evolve?

And, yes, 'ninety-nine looms, imminent; a heavy, even sinister shadow with a nasty twist lurking in its wicked tail. '99 was the West Pier Trust's target date for completion of the restoration. This now appears to be unrealistic, but whenever, I am still looking forward to walking around this fantastic structure on the first day of its re-opening.

Arthur Thickett, Nov 98

The sizzling 'sixties! It was July '70 actually but 'The Sixties' didn't start till half-way through and then swallowed half the 'seventies to make up for it.

So my story starts, July '70, London, bang in the middle of The Sixties, Time and Space-wise. That month brought another twist in my wayward life. I was given a place as a full-time mature-student at an adult residential college, generous grant and all: 'come into residence 2nd October' they said; a home too in a place like a stately old castle discreetly tarted up with mod cons: it's 'The Sixties' remember. Right there and then I chucked in my job as a Station Foreman on London's underground; London's mighty underground, which, in relatively recent time-past I'd even helped to dig — Victoria line.

If you are in London, by the way, the tube-train is the only way to travel: you can be out in the country in twenty minutes, snaking through the Metrop's very guts like a giant tape-worm. But in July '70 I myself had had enough of that. Before 'going into residence' as a mature, some said 'over-ripe', student I decided I needed another change so I quit my seedy bedsit with no regrets, leaving it to disappear without trace into swarming Earls Court and moved.... to Brighton. Why not?

On the first day there I found digs, on the second, a job; 'everything but the girl', well I was to find her too, eventually, in my fashion.

First the digs. I wanted them for a month or so and they had to be pretty cheap. July was of course high season so I left them all to it on the bed and breakfast beaten track and discovered this place two miles out of town at Ovingdean.

The Old Vienna Cafe was a quaintly charming place more or less in the countryside, on the fringe of Ovingdean's mini-sprawl and opposite a busy

farmyard. Set in its own field hard by the roadside the Vienna Cafe's other-worldliness doubtless attracted stray tourists looking for high teas or even accommodation. The well-weathered timber structure, painted red but dark with age was true Viennese in style, unless it was 'mock' – I'm no expert. The old cafe was surrounded by a small cluster of wooden holiday 'chalets', which were actually nothing but diminutive wooden huts. Each contained little more than a double or single bed but the places were clean enough, waterproof, freshly painted – white exterior, cream inside. I took a single chalet named Tyrrol; it housed a three quarters bed and was cheap, almost ridiculously so.

The place was owned and run by a suitably quaint old lady who really was Viennese: eccentric but kindly and such low prices, she managed somehow. She had one permanent resident named Hambrum, a retired man in his mid-sixties who had his own separate room in the cafe itself and who tended to watch out for her interests. Two or three yards from the huts chickens scratched and ducks waddled; in the far corner of the unkempt green surrounds a couple of goats on long tethers ate whatever was going. Sweet and sour smells constantly wafted over the place from the ever-bustling farmyard across the mucky country road.

On my second day in Brighton I got myself this job on the West Pier – Deck-hand. Well, fair-enough I suppose, piers have decks as well as ships, although they only have one, usually, plus a few bits and pieces. So I started in next morning at eight o'clock. There were only two 'deckles', a regular old hand who was in charge, and myself. The regular, Barney, sported a sailor-hat and wore something vaguely resembling a uniform and did a variety of jobs, any-thing and everything, on the spot maintenance of the well-worn structure from one end to the other. His duties also included keeping an eye on me but I did my job so he never really bothered me; it was a funny sort of job that we both had, really, but he did not have a terrific sense of humour and only occasionally managed a tight grin. To be fair he was kept pretty busy poking and prodding and bashing the old Victorian pier with a variety of heavy tools.

Barney was often to be found, spanner in hand, clinging perilously onto the structures underneath the deck, climbing sideways like some giant crab. The 'big boss' chased him far more than he did me so all in all I suppose Barney did not have a lot to laugh about. Yes, we did have a 'proper' boss, the Pier Manager, this white-collar bloke about fifty all gut and pomp who came over two or three times a day from the hotel opposite; the management there owned the pier. This guy just came and went and didn't stay around enough to bother us (me anyway) too much which was just as well because on occasions, like all bosses, he could be a pig.

My first job in a morning was to hose down the shore-end of the pier, the scruffy flotsam and jetsam candy-floss end. I'd complete this task a few minutes before half-eight, when the pier was opened to the early strollers. Next I would put up

the big flags, eight in all: the little flags strung in rows stayed up constantly; the big flags came down overnight for preservation; they also came down during daylight hours if the weather became extreme; a rare thing that summer. Putting the flags up was the most exciting thing I did all day – officially, that is! Hoisting a flag is easy enough, it's all done at the base of the flagpole; you tie the flag, right-way up, onto one rope, pull the other, round go the pulleys and up goes the flag; secure the rope, and that's that. But the base of the flagpoles were not on the deck, they were high up, on top of the concert hall or the towers. So you had to climb, first to the top of the concert hall, then right across the top sticking up four flags one by one, finally climbing down the other end. Then it was up the towers and, trickiest part, negotiating plank catwalks.

After the first few days when, quite frankly, I had the wind-up, it came easy and I thoroughly enjoyed climbing around with the early sun on my shirtless back taking in the view from the high-points as I flew the flags. At dusk I took 'em all down again (the job entailed long hours) showing off a bit if one or two youngish females were around.

After hoisting the flags in the morning I would clean up the rest of deck, working my way to the sea-end from where I'd finished my hosing down. Although this covered a lot of deck it was a slow, easy and lazy sort of job. Away from the shore end the deck planks are laid slightly apart, the resulting slots being about 3/8ths of an inch wide. So, armed with a slim handled piece of wood rather like a wooden three foot rule, but longer, I pushed the deck flotsam through the gaps and into the sea, or where there would be sea in due course. Barney always helped me with this job for half an hour, or longer if he could get away with it; giving me a hand, he would say. I soon realised he was giving himself a break by doing a bit of official skiving away from more onerous jobs awaiting his pleasure.

Before lunch I'd do what was normally my hardest task of the day; sweeping out the concert hall ready for the afternoon show. This was a bit of a drag and took me the best part of an hour, after which, at half-twelve, I had my lunch-break, one hour, unpaid. I needed that hour, though, because although hardly any of my work was really heavy or hard my hours were long; eight in the morning till nine or ten at night, six days a week, Sundays off, though I worked one or two of those as well.

Week-day afternoons were usually easy; I'd do all manner of odd jobs, a bit more deck-prodding and, if I could, a bit of hiding and skiving. I only skived if I knew that there was little more 'on' for a while than pushing kit-kat wrappers through the deck to the fishes.

Occasionally my lazy afternoon deck-prodding intrigued others who were even less gainfully occupied:

"Hello there friend, what yer doing?"

Jolted and a little peeved I turned, to take in this slightly disreputable-looking chap slumped on a wooden bench beneath the wind-break. He was on his own: "Arthur, isn't it. Remember me?"

"Err... err... Yes, I think I do, didn't we... have a drink, some-where... ?"

"Chatfields," he said, promptly, naming one of Brighton's seamiest pubs. "Few weeks ago. We 'ad quite a session. You was living in London then. Foreman or something. What you doing now?"

I told him, at the same time trying to focus in on the man, and the night at Chatfields. Yes, Glen was his name. We'd had a good session, he'd bought the first drinks; I'd bought the rest. He wasn't working, whilst I was doing reasonably well. Off duty days I'd some-times 'do' Brighton, using my quarter-fare concession card, catching the 'after-closing' train back to London. With his unique style of blarney, Glen was a rare mixture; half Liverpool-Irish, half Lancastrian, and a dash of the 'Jock' thrown in. A fascinating character and one of nature's nomads, he was fortyish. In his younger days he'd been a seaman out of Liverpool, after which and after Lord knows what ups and downs, he'd drifted easily down to Brighton... as wanderers not infrequently do. He often slept rough in summer and he was obviously doing that now. Overdressed for the weather in a worn jacket and trousers, he nonetheless kept himself clean. His head rested on a solid-looking rucksack: "Sleep on the front these warm, muggy nights; finish off with an extra hour up here; kip under the pier if it rains... "

Well, to each his own, I mused, while chatting and keeping one eye out for Barney. Glen, I recalled, from that night, was something of a poet – he had recited some of his own stuff from memory in his peculiar lilt, and, for my money, it wasn't bad. Started it at sea, I'd gathered...

I had to go off and do a bit more, leaving him to it. I offered him two bob – he took it. He hadn't asked.

"Thanks, and thanks for the extra couple you bought that night." He'd remembered then; didn't matter.

Fumbling in his jacket pocket he produced a sheet of broad-lined paper: "here, take this, yes keep it, read it later... "

"See you sometime... "

Later I read his pleasing, artistic-looking hand:

*Place the Cloak of Wisdom around my shoulder;
and with it, place the tassels of knowledge, on my head,
and in the coldest night of snow or even blizzard
I shall be warm
with honour;
Alas! although I am parted from a bed!*

Glen Connolly

I turned the page over. There... was another poem of a more personal nature about a dearly remembered child. His own daughter, perhaps...

Most afternoons I'd spend some little time crating empties in the concert hall bar and then transporting these, plus full crates and other goods, up and down the pier on an electric trolley. Once I carelessly crashed the trolley when taking a short-cut through too narrow a gap in the pier windbreak which ran the length of the pier. The truck was four feet wide; the gap – 3' 11" – metres hadn't been invented then. I should have put my whiskers through it first only I didn't have any. The truck still went – crablike; I managed with it that day and the next by keeping left-hand down hard all the time. After that Barney fixed it without realising, so far as I know, that I'd knocked it skew-wiff.

However, the main event most afternoons or early evenings was – so far as I was concerned – The Fiddle (not one of the musical variety) : most days at this time I'd contrive to spend 30 or 40 minutes on it.

What was 'The Fiddle' then? Well as every self-respecting working class person knows, all jobs have 'a fiddle' if you can find it: Actually I didn't discover this one for myself; after the first week I was 'let in' to the secret by Tom. An elderly feller, he had once held Barney's job but was now retired, though he occasionally did the odd hour or so 'casual' when we were hard pressed or when Barney wanted time off.

Now there are fiddles... and fiddles. This one was almost respectable: I suppose it was more or less legal – probably less. Anyway, you could hardly get done for it; you were very unlikely even to get sacked for it; just warned not to waste time at it. So ... our little racket, then: it was 'fishing for money.' A real gem of an operation: pure poetry – almost.

Piers, as I am sure you are aware, consist of planks firmly secured to superstructures, with gaps between each plank, hence the easy way of 'cleaning' the decks with prodders – we didn't have pollution in those carefree days; it was 'the sixties' as I keep telling you. And of course directly below the deck it was all sea or stony beach – or rather, nearly all. Because, not far off the shore-end of the pier a couple of solidly built machine-huts were situated, just below the pier

level, secured to the pier supports. They housed various mechanical and electrical things as well as other unspeakable mysteries, alive or otherwise. The flat roofs of these structures were just below the pier planking, about eight or nine inches below.

Now, imagine generations of carefree holiday-makers – sober and not – treading the smooth, well-worn pier-planks, clutching coins and purses and turning out pockets, ready to spend at the crash of a one-arm bandit or the sight of oozing-pink candyfloss.

And so... ..on top of the flat roofs a load of coins had accumulated, a regular little gold mine. It is quite likely that slot-machines had been located in that particular area at times – I didn't know or care, I was only interested in the painstaking but ingenious method of recovering these coins. First, bear in mind that these roof-tops were totally no-go areas, quite inaccessible to hand or arm; impossible to climb onto from below; only the insides of the huts were accessible from beneath the pier, to strictly authorised personnel.

Then somebody had invented... 'The coin fisher.' The device was simple to operate, easy to make; all you needed was a hacksaw blade, a bit of string and a small tin of grease.

Break a small piece, about one inch in length, off one end of a hack-saw blade. This small piece will have a hole in it, as will the remaining longer length of blade. Tie each end of an approximately two foot length of string to each of the two holes. Now, complete with your tin of grease, you are ready to operate. Smear grease liberally over both sides of the end bit. Get down on knees. Peer through gaps in pier planking onto machine-hut roof and select coin. Drop bit down onto it. Using the length of blade, which will be just long enough, press the bit firmly onto the coin; heave careful... .. and up will come the bit on the end of the string, with the coin stuck to it – easy! Some coins may require one or two tries and a little manoeuvring, but overall the system works well... ..

I soon acquired a coin-fisher and operated it frequently and successfully. Whilst fishing for cash I had to keep the public out of the way – after all, it was their money – but that was easy. I simply roped off, with appropriate 'keep out' signs, a twenty-five yard or so half-section of the pier above the huts. This action was legitimate because the planking above the machine-huts had to be swept and then swilled – no prodding there. The management could not allow sundry jetsam (except coins) to accumulate on the hut roofs; that could have constituted a fire risk and a health hazard.

So, I would fish happily for coins on the roped off section of the pier, first one half, then the other. I'd get in a good 20 minutes fishing on each side; also completing a rush sweeping and swilling job a few minutes each side. Late

afternoons were 'Big Boss Free' but I'd keep half an eye out anyway. Barney knew what I was up to and turned a blind eye so long as I didn't overdo it – he himself had done his share of fishing in times past but he was rather above it now. The coins I fished up were anything from half-pennies to half-crowns, with, somewhat astonishingly, even a few of the new 50p pieces: I managed two of these rare big fish. The half-crowns had recently gone out as legal tender but the shops on the front took them without trouble; they probably finished up going to collectors. Five and ten pence pieces were the bread and butter coins. I would haul in maybe 40 pence each day; useful in those days. The 50p piece strikes were boom days... .

Breakfast at the old Vienna:

All too quickly a daily routine was developing – damn! No use bucking it, though, it's the way of things, unless you're filthy-rich.

My day now began with breakfast at The Old Vienna Cafe, Ovingdean; country setting, animal noises 'off'. And these morning meals were certainly not restrained or boring. Lavishly served by Madame Proprietress herself – as much as you could eat – the breakfasts were traditionally English rather than Viennese. A relief – continental breakfasts are rather scrappy if you are a manual worker; as I understood it the continental proletariat took two break-fasts in order to survive.

However, the most interesting thing was... I did not eat alone.

Invariably I had two companions. One, old Hambrum, oddly named, the retired permanent resident, an East-of-Suez ex-colonial type; the other an eighteen year old youth named Ted who worked on the farm across the road. The pair could not have been more different: old Hambrum, spick-and-span-collar-and-tie-Daily-Telegraph-at-the-slope, always seated before me; Ted, a northerner, very dark, always a little untidy, unshaven, usually straggled in after me. An intelligent but ill-educated and inexperienced young man, Ted was nonetheless well-informed and brashly over-confident. Youthfully charming in his way, he was also very bolshie. The old man, well educated, decent enough, was of course a dyed-in-the-wool conservative – though not always illiberal.

Illiberal or no, breakfast conversations were lively. At first I thought it was the old man, being the more subtle, who did all the baiting; then I wondered if it wasn't fifty-fifty – maybe it just happened. But I suppose we all enjoyed it. Though not hiding the fact that I was somewhat bolshie myself – albeit a little more sophisticated, I hoped, than young Ted – I tended to referee. If it wasn't Vietnam it was Ulster or it was strikes and that uppity young devil Arthur Scargill: at least the students were having a breather until October. A Telegraph headline or radio

news would set it off over the cornflakes and orange juice:

... Paisley! – it's *'im* them snatch squads should be puttin' in jail, for a long time, not pickin' on a few poor unemployed bogsiders." Thus Ted.

"They seem to be well enough employed to me; digging up the pavements, taking over petrol stations to facilitate their Molotov cocktail factories:" Hambrum preferred the original term for 'petrol bomb', "and the size of those barricades! Plenty of willing hard labour there; yet ask them to work constructively, for *pay*, and they'd sneak off and draw the dole; totally negative attitude."

"There ain't no work *there*, Mr Hambrum – and they've a right to defend themselves."

"Is that what you call it... "

And so on. I would be drawn in: "Nasty business all round, but that Paisley really is a pro—" I was going to say 'provocateur', but changed it to "real stirrer."

Another morning it would be Vietnam:

... .. Yanks! – they should get out!"

"They're committed to getting out, now."

"What're they bombin' the north into the ground for, then? Nearly twenty-five thousand million" (25,000,000,000 'TILT' flipped up in my mind) "pounds of explosives dropped to-date – 1,000lb of bombs for every minute the Americans have been in Vietnam."

Even Hambrum's grey eyebrows lifted momentarily:

"They're *trying* to leave the south with some sort of stability. And all they *are* doin' is flattenin' everything... "

But all too soon the proprietress would come in with a solid looking sandwich pack for Ted, just for morning break; he'd an insatiable appetite, which she positively encouraged. She'd chide us for arguing, tell Ted to take care, he had a tough job, and begin to make ready for the more leisured guests' breakfasts. I'd rush out to catch the 7.37 bus at the bottom of Ainsworth Avenue for the meandering journey into Brighton, sitting on the top deck, pondering over the imposing Roedean School – for snobs? – dreamily gazing into the hazy flat-blue sea as the morning warmed up...

... So the days passed on quickly, pleasant enough mostly, but long and tiring.

Swill-decks-flags-up-sweep-prod-fetch-and-carry-sweep-prod-flags-down-bus-home: Vienna Cafe was my home address.

Illicit coin-fishing apart, it was all bed and work.

Well, not quite all...

Saturday night (and Sunday morning): Saturday nights I would contrive to get away 'early' – 9.00pm. As aforementioned, most Sundays I'd have off. This being so, most Saturdays I'd have a good old pub crawl – I'd earned it. A quick change and clean-up on the job and I'd sail forth with bells on. After brief calls here and there, perhaps Chatfields and The Ship, I'd finish up at the Belvedere, located right on the sea front under the higher promenade. Frankly, a somewhat sleazy place, it was my usual destination Saturday nights.

This particular evening after finding a corner to myself (for a start) I sat back and, with the aid of the old 'white logic' beginning to percolate, I philosophised:

First the indulgence of playing back a few vivid reels of my life; what a life! Wars, strange lands, dramas... and dramas within dramas. Love, plenty of that though never enough. My story, eventful and dramatic in the extreme at times, though I did not plan it that way at all, nor at the time did I see it that way. As it unfolded it was all... just natural. I went through it all, not unscathed, but, for a long time anyway, with a kind of innocence: the innocence of false consciousness perhaps?. My story, it was all... just natural, until I began to wonder.. .

World War Two ambushed us all, then struck at random. Many it hardly affected at all (rationing hurt nobody); some, whatever they experienced were barely touched; some... it transformed totally. For me The War and the series of personal dramas it wrought upon me shattered my otherwise bland enough life for ever. It had the further effect of shoving me into a flood of graphic events, both personal and climactic: this state then continued to feed upon itself – potentially dangerous and de-humanising for me though I was not aware of this in 1970 or for some time afterwards.

But I had begun to wonder... and I had begun to write... By 1967 my writing had started to take some shape and amongst the junk I now had two or three fully completed short stories, for what they were worth. I tried anything, but mostly a mixture, in varying degrees, of truth and fiction, with truth the largest element.

I bought myself another drink (and started a new chapter:)

...My Story: instant by instant I'm living a story here tonight, making a story by my actions, but writing is also a form of action; what I'm doing, really, always, whether I'm writing or... just... being and doing, all the time, I'm striving to

complete My Story... .. No, wait! – that's not so, that's wrong; this 'I', my 'I', ... 'I', am but a fragment and My Story, however strange, however apparently mine...is not mine. Whatever choices I'm seemingly making now I've only to look back to realise that I did not invent my story to-date, had very little to do with its construction and incident, very little, largely it just happened to me. Still, I do strive, there is an input, however minute. What am I doing then? What I am doing all the time, I suppose, 'My Story' is a fragment of the history of the human race: I'm not even doing it, I'm a tiny part of 'Our Story.'

Betty sat herself down at my table – Belvedere Betty. I bought her a drink... and another for me. I'd met her before, I was in love with her – but it was hopeless. For the moment though I was preoccupied; I had a plan, an original idea. I could start up a Banana Farm – no-one else would have one; I would create, by artificial means, all the... conditions necessary... they grow bananas at Kew, don't they? Well, I could grow them. After glancing again at the bunch of bananas on the bar and wondering what they were doing there, I sat down with the drinks.

"I'm thinkin' 'bout starting a ban-an-an-ana farm – how you spell ban...a...ana?" I asked Betty.

"You're pissed," said she.

"No, just on th' way."

"Same thing."

"Snot."

"'Tis. Thanks anyway. Have you seen Bertie?" Bertie was her 'boyfriend'

"Didn' you come in with him – her?"

"Yes, but she's disappeared."

"Gone 'the loo... don' worry; he'll – she'll come back."

"I am worried, she might have gone with some-one else."

Excusing herself Betty went to the loo, and suddenly Bertie materialised at my table. I got her a drink before she asked and we talked 'a kind of politics' for a while. I found Bertie interesting to talk to... even though she was my rival for the attentions of blonde Betty. I couldn't talk to Betty that way but then you couldn't talk to most people, seriously, about political and social matters. Sad but true, most people, whatever their potential, were lazy that way; really, they didn't want to think – seriously. Oh, well... Bertie and I, in social terms, had the same old

loves and hates. We even both loved Betty, come to think of it. Rivals: no – I didn't have a look in.

I didn't resent Bertie at all; I just found it strange that Betty was attracted to her and not to me, I never ceased to wonder, but... so be it. You can't win 'em all: not that I'd ever tried to. Funny affair theirs, though; Betty keen – Bertie casual, always the same. Still, it wasn't my affair – to each their own. Yet on one plane I always kept on wondering and always kept up the illusion, knowing it to be an illusion, that I might yet win Betty.. .

Who, after quite some minutes had returned. They started arguing mildly, casually, and they both kept me in it. I refereed a bit, agreeing with them both in turn though I didn't really know what they were on about and soon I paid a necessary visit to the loo, observing in passing that the bananas had gone though the bag was still there.

Betty was on her own when I returned. "You're nice guy," she said.

What she meant was that the booze made me philosophical, 'generous' and magnanimous. I enjoyed the role. We talked about her, we talked about Bertie; she said she 'liked me 'lot.' The booze did most of the talking for us. Twice her hand fleetingly brushed my arm. I gave her 50p, 'before she asked.'

The 'white logic' contracted the time: she went off, saying she would see me again 'soon.' Well, she always did.

She gave Bertie at the bar the 50p, she always did. Bertie waved at me; they left a few moments later but not before I had been joined by... Jenny.

"Can-I-come-in-for-a-minute... ?" She kind of sang it, in a low, Marlene Dietrich style. It was her thing.

"'Ello. Well, you are in."

"At last... you're in demand."

"What ye' min... ?"

"You know."

"I'm not in demand... not at all, unfortunately. Anyway, how've you been? Haven't seen you in ages. Been away?"

"Yes, in jail."

Half-cut or no, the remark still made me sit to attention for a moment. I looked at her. I'd known Jenny for six months or so now, Brighton being a regular watering hole for me even when I had lived in London and worked as a station foreman, with cheap travel. It had only been two or three months since I had last seen Jenny... yet she had changed noticeably. She seemed maybe... harder, yet somehow more vulnerable. Her voice sounded different, a little more harsh, but a quiver, a tremor, was also discernible. It was her second time inside, then. Her first spell had only been about ten days; this time, I gathered, it was longer. And something had hurt her. I could tell, I could see it – I was sorry.

I think she had told me what her first 'visit' had been about but I'd been drunk at the time and had not remembered (one of the snags of abuse of the 'white logic') I won't ask anything now, I thought, I'll commiserate, let her say anything she may want to say... but other-wise I'll let it go..

She was talking, I was listening. It was after eleven but I'd man-aged to obtain last drinks and get grip; I could hold it well through conscious effort. I was listening and thinking: Jenny, more sinned against than sinning: Jenny... Betty and Bertie, all of them, yes, and old Glen, the poet who slept on or under the pier, I'd seen him turn up here when he had a few bob in his pocket. The underdog's pub. .. rough justice... no justice... 'us and them'... I was off onto my old tack... but it was rough justice... life.. .

"Can I come back with you? – oh, go on."

She kept on at me; kept on asking me. I kept on making excuses. I worked long hours... I was tired. I just wanted to sleep. That was all she wanted to do, she said, but she just didn't want to be alone 'tonight'. I believed her.

"Trouble is, ye' see, I'm not supposed to have overnight visitors."

It might have been true or not, I didn't know. But it made no impression at all on Jenny. I didn't want her to come back to the chalet with me, though. If only it had been Betty: well, that's life. Jenny I simply regarded as an occasional drinking companion, and up 'till tonight it seemed to have been the same with her. But now.. .

"No one'll know, please, let me come back with you tonight... "

I couldn't say 'no' point blank and I'd run out of excuses.

"It's just... I don't wanna' be alone tonight." It was almost an apology – she knew she'd won.

I felt sure that her desire not to be alone tonight had a lot to do with her second

spell inside.

"Well... we must be very quiet going' in, then."

"Course we will..."

We were.

Leaving the last bus to Ovingdean at the corner we quietly moved into the old cafe grounds, merging with the shadows. Somewhere on the darker side an animal moved, one of the goats. We stifled a nervous giggle. One or two chalet lights showed but all was quiet. Quickly we were indoors with curtains drawn to, talking low as we undressed casually. The bed was a three quarters, plenty of room. A quick peck "g'night" as the alcoholic haze closed in and we were off to sleep holding hands.

Outside a crescent moon drifted lazily through wispy-white cloud; the goat turned in. Over on the farm a dog howled fitfully... we heard it not. We didn't hear the cock crow... or the milkman.. .

Quarter to seven — suddenly wide awake. Didn't feel too bad. We'd better get up soon, I thought. I looked at Jenny. She still slept. Dark Jenny, tousled hair, features calm, breathing quietly...

Moving closer I gently put my hand onto her bare arm. Murmuring un-intelligibly, she moved my way slightly. Casually, confidently, gently I put my arm around her.. .

And... suddenly wide awake... she screamed... right out of the blue!

Wha'-the-hell's-wrong-with-her!?! She'll bring the whole bloody camp down on us: "F' god's sake shur'rup!" I uttered, nonplused.

She screamed again.

"Shur'rup!" I yelled sharply. "You'll wake 'em all: what the heck's the marrar?"

She turned a bemused gaze at me. Though troubled, she seemed calmer. I almost laughed... but not quite. The situation was pure farce, but still worrying. I knew that whatever was upsetting her.. . it wasn't me. As yet she hadn't spoken.

"Please be quiet, I'm not touching you."

"I know; 's alright now. Sorry — it's not you."

She reached out; we held hands a moment. It wasn't difficult for me to imagine things that may have been troubling her as she awoke. I'd had similar trouble myself — bad at times. I didn't pursue the matter. Outside everything remained quiet.

"Saturday night 'n Sunday morning; they're all hungover," I suggested.

"Else they're all at it." We both giggled.

"Best get moving now, though; fancy a good breakfast?"

Twenty minutes later, in the back of a near empty bus, we laughed all the way to town where we soon found an early cafe and had a damn good breakfast, still laughing... ..

"HERE THEY COME!"

August bank holiday – a thronging West Pier. Out of a brilliant, clear blue sky they came, streaking past in vivid-red silence, followed next instant by a massive roar. The Red Arrows. First in a diamond wedge tight as a fist they looped, then line ahead they looped again, flashing a few dozen feet over our pier before buzzing the Palace Pier. After such preliminaries they really got going. Two clever-devils broke away and did breathtaking and obviously dangerous feats while the other seven played above, all now using multi-coloured smoke-trails; overall a fantastic spectacle.

Soon the most hair-raising stunt of the clever devil duo unfolded. One of the pair flew east beyond the Palace Pier whilst the other went west, away from our overcrowded pleasure-planks. Then, simultaneously, they both executed a tight U-turn and set course, one for our West Pier, the other for the Palace Pier, losing height as they approached. Each zoomed a score or so feet above their respective piers, still sharply losing height! – thus heading at the water and... pointed directly at each other! Then, almost zero feet above the water they levelled off, still heading directly at each other over that stretch of water between the two piers. At the last possible instant they banked sideways, one right one left, thus flashing their underbellies by each other, wing-tips almost skimming the water.

I distinctly recall leaning on the pier rail (I was 'working') looking DOWN at the two planes executing this manoeuvre, more than once, streaming fabulous multi-coloured smoke. Another trick was for the whole nine, line ahead, to zoom between the two most prominent high-rise buildings – the Metropole and Grand, I think – on the seafront...

As I recall it a tragic sequel to this display made it stand out as all the more

spectacular. Not so very many months after doing their Brighton high-summer show the Red Arrows, while putting on another display elsewhere, were involved in a serious crash into spectators, among whom fatalities occurred. The powers that be decided that, henceforth, for reasons of public safety the altitude level of the Red Arrow stunts had to be raised.

Never again, after August 'seventy, was one able to LOOK DOWN from the Brighton piers at the top-two Red-Arrows in action... or look down from one's hotel window, assuming one had pots of cash, at all nine red devils flashing and roaring past under one's nose...

But after watching that breathtaking display I had work to do... in plenty. I'd already had a hard morning, August Bank Holiday being, of course, an exceptional day on the pier – the last hazy-crazy-day proper of the silly season. People went a bit hysterical as they realised that in a couple or so days there would be an 'R' in the month again, then the kids to be pilloried back to school... and in no time at all 'they' would be taking the hour back off them thus officially ending the long warm days... leaving the fog and cold and wet leaves to take over outdoors.. .

So all day long a hot mad mob trod the trembling pier-planks; no time for coin-fishing today! Still, they might oblige me with a bit of quick coin-'fish' restocking on top of the machine-hut roofs. Meanwhile I got stuck in working on the concert hall for the afternoon show: finish off the sweeping up then whistle up and down the rows arranging the skew-if chairs more or less neatly; a lonely task in the rather austere concrete-floored auditorium, hearing the cheerful mob outside. Dreaming a bit to alleviate the boredom I first pondered over the Red Arrows. Ambivalence. How could I be churlish at them for doing something so well? But were they not, in fact, part of the War Machine?

War ... it condoned everything – on *your* side.. .

It's twenty five years since That War; the war, they told us, that was The War to end Wars. (It was the second war to end wars, because the first one didn't.)

The second one didn't either; but those of us who were very young then, we believed it – many of us, anyway. We believed it because we were young, naive, under-educated; but we also believed it because many people did mean it – many people regardless of rank or status who were involved in that war in-tended to make it The War to end Wars.

However, by 1951 I was slogging up and down hills on a strange and rugged Asian peninsula that nobody had ever heard of... until it was split asunder by another war. I froze in hill-side trenches as the Siberian-style winter reigned over all, trembled behind paddi-buns bisecting abandoned rice-fields as hot metal

hissed overhead, squirmed as the shells roared in and vicious splinters snarled about my ears.

I saw the clinging, yellow napalm oozing down enemy hills; watched our men shooting at civilians who got in the way; occasionally wondered what I was doing in the god forsaken place...

That was the Korean peninsula – 1951/52.

But on the rest leaves they flew us over to Japan and the girls and the beer – or the beer and the girls if you preferred. And I stood in Hiroshima – the new Hiroshima – and saw what was left of the old: The Dome... the shadow of the evaporated man eternally etched into the bridge... and The Scar – a scar like no other, like twisted, knotted cord – on the back of a girl in a bar.

... ..sweep-sweep – I floated back to the present.

The boring old concert-hall sweep; the stiff bristle's harsh 'scrunch-scrunch' over the rough concrete floor going 'right through' me. And the dust! I put water down, opened the windows. Sweeping again I felt better, seeing and hearing the happy, milling throng, listening to the speaker music, the latest 'Beatles' vying with the old 'Lambeth Walk.'

Young and old waltzing by, mostly young now that, as well as the holidays, schools and colleges were out. All types: 'kiss-me-quick' hats and mini-skirts mingling with the more recently established 'egalitarian' jeans of student-types; and the more discerning young women – Oxford Street assistants and art students, perhaps? – they drifted along elegantly in the very latest, the maxi-skirt... Now a colourful group caught my eye, the girls in beads and, I figured, caftans, accompanied by wild-looking youths in weird shirts and beads and any-thing else they could hang on themselves, topped up with truly massive shocks of hair – and was that pot they were smoking? Flower power... or something. I noticed a few older people shaking their heads as the group passed... a little circus unto themselves... I grinned to myself; they were harmless enough even though some of their elders certainly did not approve; 'harmless', no that wasn't really the word. The young these days might appear frivolous, way out, but many of them, workers and students – as well as, fair to say, some older people, were trying to stop a war... ..

They poured into Grosvenor Square, banners flying, the human tide swamping over the green, swelling into every corner, chanting – chanting: "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh..." The front ranks closed, nose to nose with the mass police lines. Above the eagles, at the embassy windows, faces peered.

Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh -

We will fight and we will win!

The chanting rose to a crescendo – suddenly stopped. A moment of near-silence, almost unbearable... then, to the sound of thin cheers turning into a deepening, growling roar, the first banner-poles flew. The sound became a menacing howl, the tightly-packed mob behind burst through their own front ranks; police and crowd fused in a swaying, battling mass – helmets flew.

The mob were breaking through; poles, smoke-bombs, sundry missiles rained in on police and embassy; windows shattered, the faces above grew anxious... the howl became a triumphant snarl – then the mounted police charged...

They skirmished across the green, for them ideal terrain, riders wielding their massive truncheons. Demonstrators scattered, went down... the mob was in frenzied retreat. The foot-police made darting forays, arresting indiscriminately, not gently. Running fights developed everywhere; the chanting howl broke down into shouting and screaming; a mess of bedraggled banners, branches, earth-clods and helmets appeared, strewn across the green, gardens and roadways; clothing hung among the lower branches of trees. Sirens wailed, ambulances pushed through; demonstrators, struggling and yelling, were led, shoved or thrown into police-buses.

Watching from what was at first the relative safety of the middle-ranks on the green, I saw the horses charge – my way. As the 'front-line' developed around me I heat a hasty retreat. Eventually, in an apparently safe corner of the square by South Audsley Street I turned again to gawp; but a police raiding party suddenly materialised there and dragged another dozen of us off to add to the collection: "What did you do in The Great Sixties, daddy?"... "Well, son, I was arrested in the first 'sixty-eight Battle of Grosvenor Square."... "What were you doing, daddy?" ... "Running away..."

Sweep-sweep – back to the Pier again. Finishing off I fell to wondering if I might catch a glimpse of the really stunning red-headed actress who, with the others, should now be somewhere backstage, making ready, laughing, such a dazzling smile.. .

Finished. I went outside glad to breathe fresh air. Three or four tangled deck-chairs formed an untidy mess blocking a door. Not my job. One feller in uniform with a bulging leather money-bag 'did' the chairs all day and nothing else (bet he had a good little racket.) But some-one was trying to get out. I shifted the deck-chairs and... out she came! Flaming red hair, red dress, cleavage but not overdone... flamboyant but warm and human... and a smile just for me:

"Thank you – thank you..."

"... ..N-no trouble at all," I stammered manfully, caught in the beam full flood...

When I had recovered and moved on and glanced back unobtrusively I saw three or four of them, actors and actresses. They were standing outside the stage-door as they were wont to do just before an afternoon show, having a little air and a smoke and a chat. But I saw only one; a born actress, she enjoyed, even needed, to be seen... but she was radiant – she *gave*...

My August Bank holiday was made.

... But not over, by any means!

After rushing up extra booze supplies and whatever on the electric trolley I had to remove, empty and replace the large wire rubbish containers, using the trolley to make the work easier. Normally it wasn't a terribly dirty job – but today wasn't normal. Completing the task and relieved to get away from the lazy wasps and stale-pink ice-cream flecks I went off to give myself an extra-good hand-wash and swill – but didn't make it to the gent's. Instead a harassed Barney, hot, sweating, sailor hat askew, collared me for another job: "Yeah, right away, now – now, pronto!" behind the bar.

Whereon I presented myself there and then 'pronto!' to whomever was running things behind the concert-hall bar. I don't think any-body was; chaos reigned there. The evening show was under way with the auditorium re-arranged and the Great British Public sitting around tables swilling back beer while laughing at lurid jokes and everything else, funny or otherwise: an awesome sight. And suddenly my job was to help keep the GBP happily supplied with booze on a hot-Brighton-August-Bank-Holiday -evening – a daunting prospect.

It was all waiter service. They wheeled in constantly with trays: first disgorging their empty glasses and small bottles; next picking out from crates the few full small bottles they required before cramming their trays full with all half-pint size glasses brimming with bitter: no pints, too awkward, the GBP simply bought it by the tray load. One man was filling the bitter glasses as well as trying to cope with shoving empty bottles into crates and shift full crates. A woman was collecting, washing and restacking the glasses. She was flying.

A teetotaller would be drunk on the odour – there were none.

"Barney sent—"

"Great," The Man said. "Just get down there on that tap and fill glasses, jus' keep on fillin' an' fillin'."

"Right," I replied, "just gotta' wash me hands first, though; been emptying

rubbish, see. Where's—"

"Don' mind that! Wash 'em in the beer!"

He meant it.

That shook me a bit, but what could I do... ? Half-turning I caught the woman's eye. Mary, I knew her by sight. She grinned at me in mid-flight, at the same time nodding frantically at me – 'get-on-with-it.' The message was clear.

I started right in filling – fast. At least, I thought I was fast. It was dead-easy, a simple, mobile tap, not a 'pull' job. I just moved glass to glass turning the tap on and off, also allowing an instant for froth.

"No good – yer not fast enough!" Two minutes later and the man was behind me.

"Mary, take over 'ere. "

Mary 'took over 'ere' without even changing flight. I hovered.

"Yer does it like this see, son." (Mary would've been about fifty if she'd let time catch up with her.)

I gaped. She certainly filled much faster than I did. She just lined the glasses in rows into a solid phalanx, six by six; turned the tap on full and filled the lot at one go moving along non-stop no froth pause beer going in the glasses and everywhere else – no drip tray. In no time every glass was brim full and booze flooding everywhere.

Well, I could have done that... I suppose.. .

No second chance. Oh, well, a bit sheepish I thought I'll go and find Barney see what's doing...

But "Fill them crates wi' empties then bring them full crates back there over 'ere then shift them filled empty crates over there to where the full 'ens was." The Man was behind me again. "When yer done that come wi' me down the tap-room there's kegs ter shift."

There was 'kegs ter shift.' I also noticed that a skinny kid about fourteen had been dragged in to do the washing up. The GBP excelled themselves that night. But in the seconds between rounds I managed to exchange the odd few words with perpetual-motion-Mary.

She started in at seven in the morning – to my eight – finished maybe half an

hour earlier than me but no Sundays off – no days off at all. She did a cleaning job early, then shared a pier-stall with her husband, they alternated, he also did other jobs.

"We're all the same 'ere, luv; we work like mad all summer, see, non-stop, no time off, then, come October we goes off on a long 'oliday in Spain. Then we comes back an' gets a winter job, the lucky ones that is, then... we does it all over again..."

It was a way of life for them, I realised. They made some money, not *that* much, and worked all hours under the sun for it. Mary: a good scout, not much on her, tough as nails but aging prematurely, I figured, like a lot of them, Spain or no.. .

Ten o'clock at last, I was almost on my knees... But I'm charging off to the Belvedere right now, regardless, and if I *am* a bit late in the morning, well, sod it...

The actual date of the Red Arrows display was August 7th, 1970. Taking that into account, the events depicted here are true, the characters are real people though their names have been changed.

A.T., Brighton 1993

Postscript

About mid-September 1970 I left Brighton.

After packing in my job on the West Pier and bidding farewell to Madame and the Old Vienna Cafe and the goats and the ducks and all that ... I returned to London for a brief spell before duly taking up my place at the Newbattle Abbey Adult Residential College in Scotland. And a grand place it was too. So began a new way of life. I quickly discovered that my attitude to Higher Education was, to say the least, ambivalent. Perhaps after 43 years as one of 'us', I was bound to find even the custom designed academia for mature students somewhat constraining: it was still 'them'. I wrestled uneasily within my 'Place', finally leaving 'under a cloud' and returned for almost a year to my job as Foreman on the London Underground. Later I did complete a full-time degree course in Humanities and topped it up with a certificate in teaching at London University.

For a short while I taught in London's inner suburbs. At first I managed well in the adolescent jungle before an accident caused me to lose confidence in my ability to teach; the transformation was quite shattering and I left the profession 'for health reasons, probably to return in a year'. But I knew I never would return.

Taking up a job in a warehouse I found that the effort of manual work gradually

restored my morale and general confidence. After a while I even became 'acting' chargehand. But the early 'eighties recession arrived and nearly 50% of the staff, including myself, were made redundant with a small payment.

At that stage I returned to Brighton. My plan was to live cheaply and write as much as possible but also to work — at anything I could get — for most of the time. But here was almost no work around. 'Those days' had gone. There was some casual paid work, but that was all. And they were beginning to say I was too old. I found myself doing voluntary work mainly associated with private sector housing conditions; trying in varying ways, to improve the rented tenants' lot. It was a kind of black hole, out of which one might never emerge, and within which, as much paid work loomed ahead as one was prepared to tackle. I managed to write quite a bit from within 'the hole'. I did escape the black hole in the end, only to find QueenSpark Books, from which there is no escape — but I am happy there with the inmates, having found my spiritual home ... at last.

The greatest lesson of all that I have learned in my now quite long and varied life, which has included too much war in one place or another, is utterly simple and can be encapsulated neatly in that great 'sixties slogan: MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. Here I mean the term 'love', to be taken in its broadest and truest sense — but if some would like to take it another way, well that's all right too because there surely cannot be anything too ambiguous about the term.

In conclusion I wish to mention all my QS friends for the friendly and selfless way they keep QueenSpark going, with particular thanks to Carol, Mike and Chris for working on this book; also thanks to Nick and the Manuscripts Group.

Not forgetting, finally, my family, my good friends in Kent and Crawley, and Dylan, and The Crescent crowd.

Arthur Thickett
Brighton 1993

Copyright 1993 QueenSpark Books
www.queensparkbooks.org.uk